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Nicaragua: Hill Concern on U.S. Objectives Persists

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Seeking to defuse reports that the Reagan administration is trying to topple Nicaragua's Sandinista government, CIA Director William J. Casey has told key members of Congress that the administration's chief objective in supporting covert operations against Nicaragua is stopping the flow of arms to guerrilla forces in nearby El Salvador.

According to Capitol Hill sources familiar with Casey's closed-door briefings during December to congressional committees overseeing U.S. intelligence activities, his assurances satisfied some members and prompted no major protests, but left a number of questions unresolved.

The uppermost concern expressed by oversight committee members is whether the United States can avoid a deepening military and paramilitary involvement in Central America when continuing to support Nicaraguan exile groups whose openly stated goal is the overthrow of the current Sandinista leadership.

Questioning Casey's contention that the administration is doing this only to interdict arms traffic to Salvadoran guerrillas, one congressional oversight committee member said, "You can't get people to fight for interdicting arms."

The Casey briefings added another layer to the continuing controversy over the Reagan administration's objectives in Nicaragua, whose 3-year-old Sandinista government has established increasingly close ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The policy conflict was underscored by statements of senior State Department officials as recently as November indicating that arms interdiction had become a secondary goal in the administration's strategy for Nicaragua.

These officials told members of Congress and reporters in background briefings that the administration's primary goal was to isolate and pressure the Sandinista government until it becomes more democratic and gives up some control to more moderate political forces in the country.

Reacting to reports of escalating CIA activity against Nicaragua, Congress banned any U.S. support for the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government.

But congressional sources said

Casey successfully lobbied congressional leaders to tone down the language of the prohibition and leave the CIA free to continue giving money and other support to several thousand Nicaraguan exiles based in camps along the Honduran border and inside Nicaragua.

These groups conduct what administration officials have characterized as "harassment" in raids against Nicaraguan militiamen in the country's sparsely populated northern frontier regions.

The Casey briefings came a year after President Reagan signed, on Dec. 2, 1981, a presidential "finding" required under the National Security Act to justify as a matter of law and national interest the "support and conduct of political and paramilitary operations against the Cuban presence and Cuban-Sandinista support structure in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America."

But press disclosures in the wake of that decision have made the Nicaraguan campaign one of the least secret covert operations in CIA history. An assessment of the program, according to officials who have monitored it, indicates that the administration has achieved very limited results:

- The Nicaraguan government continues to provide logistical support to the supply of arms to Salvadoran guerrillas. The Sandinista leadership continues its close ties with Cuba, and has made no discernible move toward accepting a U.S. demand that Nicaragua reduce the size of its large standing army and militia forces before negotiating improved relations with the United States.

- Though the overland routes from Nicaragua through Honduras to the Salvadoran frontier are better protected against arms traffic, guerrilla resupply is still active via air corridors along the Pacific coastline.

- The efforts of Nicaraguan exile groups to unite in an attractive alternative to the present Sandinista regime continue to be hamstrung by an over-representation of former national guardsmen who served the government of the late Gen. Anastasio Somoza and by the refusal of one of the most popular exile leaders, Eden Pastora, to join them.

- A planned 1,000-man paramilitary force, described in the CIA's proposal to Reagan in November, 1981, as undergoing training in Argentina, was never deployed in the region. And in the aftermath of the Falkland Islands war, during which the United States provided support to Britain in its fight against Argentina, the Argentine commitment to working with the U.S. covert forces has been limited to providing about three dozen advisers to exile groups.

"I don't see where we've accomplished a damn thing," said one congressional critic reviewing the impact of the CIA program.

The only measure of success in the Nicaraguan campaign was

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